Monitoring Curriculum: Worth the While

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

I am in my second year as principal of a PreK-5 elementary school. We had adopted a new math curriculum my first year that was touted as having a strong online component. As is often true with adoptions, the expectation from the district was that we would teach the program with fidelity the first year. Teachers worked hard at doing that with the written curriculum, but the online curriculum was more hit and miss not only by grade level, but even by classrooms within a grade level. At the end of the year, the data showed that fewer than 10% of students had met the mark of using the online component for the minimum amount of 45 minutes per week. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to explore the reasons why students were not meeting those minimum expectations.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered whether the online component of the math curriculum was worth the effort to endorse and monitor.

Methods/Procedures:

The first thing I did was talk with teachers about why they were or were not using the online math curriculum on a regular basis. I learned many things during these conversations. First of all, I learned that the minutes recorded in my data were not necessarily accurate. Students only got credit for completion of tasks. If they stopped in the middle of a lesson, or were taking time to solve a problem offline, it didn't register as minutes working. So some of the data was not always accurate. Another thing I learned was that the program was not always compatible with the student iPads. The program was designed to work on the Dell Laptops, but we only have one classroom set for checkout, and so they were not always available when teachers needed them. In addition, some teachers said that the internet was often slow in their rooms and the program was not motivating for students because they spent time waiting for it to load.

The second thing I wanted to find out was how closely the data of the program aligned with general math achievement as shown by other math data points we were accustomed to using. We already had Math NWEA that was also divided into strands in the same way as the data from the online curriculum. For this I chose one grade level, and took copies of of their NWEA reports that divided student achievement into strands. I also printeed their curriculum online achievement report divided into strands If students were in the same category of achievement in both places, I marked them as green.

I also wanted to know how the online math data correlated with their daily classwork. For this I compared the standards based report cards with the online math data. In talking with the teachers, I knew that their report card grades were not in any formal way associated with the reports provided by the online curriculum. Again, my reason for doing this was to determine whether or not I could use existing data to encourage teachers to use the online curriculum with confidence.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that in fourth grade there was a tight correlation between data from NWEA and the online curriculum. I also learned that there was a tight correlation between the daily classwork, as evidenced by the report cards, and the online work.

We have been using NWEA to track the math growth of students. This test is taken three times a year, and we do not currently use NWEA assessments in between the testing windows to determine whether students are on track and making growth. Because we also give the math curriculum assessment three times each year, and there is such a strong correlation, my goal for teachers next year is that they use the online curriculum to set growth goals with students so that progress can be tracked throughout the year and between testing windows.

A tight correlation exits between what teachers are seeing from students in their daily work and in the online curriculum. Teachers are always looking for meaningful ways to differentiate learning for students. Also, students learn best when the work they do for intervention and extension complements the core curriculum. The online curriculum is ready and available. The data from the teachers who use it regularly shows that it is reliable. Why would teachers not take advantage of this? Taking the time to transfer from the online math resources they are more familiar with to this newly adopted program will be worth their efforts. That is my message.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

One of the things I learned from doing this project is the importance of writing down a specific action plan, even for completing a simple project, and especially when that project would not necessarily HAVE to be done. If it weren't for being involved in this formal action research experience, this wondering may have been something I thought should be pursued, but because it was not a mandatory part of my job and it did not contain district deadlines, it might have slipped by the wayside.

Another good reminder in this process was the importance of getting the story behind the data. I was ready to make judgments about what was happening in classroom based only on the instructional minutes report, the quantitative data. When I talked with teachers about the why behind the data, the qualitative data, a different picture emerged.

As a result of this first investigation, I have already begun to lay out a systematic plan for continued monitoring of the use of not only this program, but others as well. Because a guaranteed and viable curriculum is the bedrock of high reliability schools, (Marzano, Warrick, Sims, 2014), it is imperative that this becomes a part of my administrative practice. If it is not deliberately planned for, it will not happen.

In a broader sense, the practice of keeping a running list of "I wonder" statements is a powerful one. It allows me to capture what might otherwise be fleeting thoughts. While the number of wonderings far exceeds the amount of time to pursue each one, I believe the habit of thinking in this way and the practice of writing them down will help to identify true concerns as they emerge over time, and to hone in on what aspects of the school most need to be addressed in order for sustained improvement to happen.

References:

Marzano, R., Warrick, P., & Simms, J. (2014). A handbook for high reliability schools. . . The next step in school reform. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research.